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Critic Concedes Case For Covert Action . . .

I think most congressmen would now agree that there are more legitimate grounds for using covert action than we thought before.

If we are going to get back into the covert action business, as now appears likely, the question for all of us is this: how do you delineate what we ought to do and not to do?

One can argue whether such things as assassinations ought to be specifically prohibited, or whether we ought to have a procedure for reviewing proposed covert actions without any list of prohibitions, and allowing the procedure itself to weed out the undesirable activities.

I favor having a procedure to determine what covert activities should be permitted, rather than saying: "We don't do assassinations, we won't overthrow democratically elected governments," and the like.

Lists Will Fail

A list always turns out to be inadequate. Something will come up that no one ever thought of, or something will appear on the prohibited list—although there might be some special circumstances that would later make it reasonable.

I think that rather than having prohibitions, we should have a procedure.

Another question is, Under what ground rules should we justify covert actions these days? Let me toss out a new idea.

We used to require "plausible deniability" for covert actions; you made sure that the principals were

Rep. Aspin, D-Wisc., has been a leading critic of abuses by CIA.

protected if the thing ever came to light. I would suggest the standard of plausible admissibility in covert actions, in the sense that you want the covert actions that you're doing to be consistent with the moral character of the American public.

In other words you would not want to do something that, if it became public, would be terribly embarrassing to the U.S. government because most Americans would consider it immoral.

Second, I think you want to have covert actions that are consistent with America's publicly stated foreign policy. In other words, you should not have one foreign policy for public consumption, and then be conducting a different foreign policy by covert action.

The test in this is what people would say if the issue became public. And if they would say, "Well, we didn't know about that, but basically we think it's a good idea, and it is consistent with what the administration has been saying, and we don't see anything wrong with it," then I think it's the kind of action that ought to be approved.

If the covert action runs counter to that, or if it's being done to hide the action from the American people, or if we're using it to hide something that Americans would find morally offensive, then it should not be done.

That's not a perfect guideline, but I'm groping for something because we are getting back into the covert action business, and we must set some standards and fix some guidelines so we don't drift back into the world of the bad old days.